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## Ways of Working

### Abstract

Ways of working details the development of workshops for primary age children focusing on the giving and receiving of feedback during selected tasks. This is the first stage in work on peer coaching skills with this age group. The paper discusses the rationale for the chosen tasks and the changes made to the workshops through the experiences with different groups of children. The paper ends with reflections on the process by the researchers from different backgrounds and suggests ways of moving forward with this area.

Keywords: coaching, methods

### Introduction

This paper gives a brief overview of a methodology followed by two researchers working collaboratively in the area of coaching in education. Specifically, the researchers designed and facilitated workshops on coaching-related skills for primary school children in order to explore the potential effect of such interventions in educational settings. Our key long-term aim is to examine whether the development of peer coaching skills in 'non academic' tasks has an impact on 'academic' attitudes and achievement. This is in contrast to existing research around coaching in education which mostly focuses directly on the impact of subject achievement (Hull, Balka, & Miles, 2009).

### Designing the workshops

After selecting the research topic (the potential effect of coaching-related interventions in primary school classrooms), we focused on designing a workshop of activities suitable to engage primary school children in learning about coaching skills. Rather than trying to design a workshop encompassing all the skills at once we decided to focus on just one skill which would be of immediate use in the classroom. The specific focus chosen was on the skills of 'giving and receiving feedback' which are often cited as important coaching-related skills (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005, Dembkowski, Eldridge, & Hunter, 2006, Hawkins & Smith, 2006). Hawkins and Smith define 'giving feedback' as the 'process of telling another person how they are experienced' (p. 225). They see clear feedback delivered through coaching as 'a rare gift to people' (p. 226). Discussing executive coaching, Dembkowski et al. propose that it is a coach's responsibility 'to provide feedback that is purposeful and with a positive intent', going on to list the following aims of effective feedback: 'create a greater level of understanding'; 'build skills'; 'encourage productive action' and 'enhance ... self confidence' (p. 53). In fact, in a book about coaching in schools, Cheliotis and Reilly identify 'reflective feedback' as one of three key skills of coaching alongside 'committed listening' and 'powerful speaking' (2010).

We felt that the skills of giving and receiving feedback could therefore have a positive impact in the classroom.

We decided to work directly with the children to develop the skills of giving and receiving feedback through a workshop which incorporated a number of different activities. The

selection of these activities deliberately aimed at building the coaching-related skills of giving and receiving feedback and did not seek to address academic areas of the curriculum. The rationale for this decision came from a number of key sources: firstly, the experience of the researchers as coaches and teachers; secondly, the lack of knowledge of the academic abilities in each class; and thirdly, the influence of Wegerif, Mercer, Littleton, Rowe, and Dawes's (2004) from work on the development of talk skills across the curriculum. In their project work 'Thinking together' they promote an approach to developing the skills of talk and thinking away from academic areas first before attempting to apply these to academic areas. We decided that there was a risk that children would not participate fully if they were anxious about their academic skills. We decided upon a structure for the workshop based on these ideas and the previous work of Vlach and Carver (2008)

Building on procedures already utilised in some schools (e.g. 'talk partners' and 'assessment for learning'), we focused our activities on how children might give and receive feedback after working on a range of tasks. As mentioned above, these tasks were not based around 'academic' subjects and skills but around activities involving drawing, simple game play and a physical task.

### Presentation of workshops

The researchers offered a workshop approach to developing peer coaching skills within school children's ordinary classroom context. Typically, the workshops lasted between an hour and a half and two hours, and all took place in the afternoon teaching sessions immediately after the lunchtime break. Initially, we offered the workshop to schools for year six children and we worked with six classes in five different schools within one local authority. The schools were, therefore, self-selecting rather than the researchers having a pre-existing set of categories within which to select the schools for this initial research. The data collection methods reported are predominantly ethnographic combined with pre- and post-responses to the drawing task given, linked to the work of Vlach and Carver (2008). Vlach, H.A., & Carver, S.M. 2008. The effects of observation coaching on children's graphic representations, though their focus was on observational coaching rather than peer coaching feedback skills. Our data collection for evaluation included class, teacher and researcher observations, and recording children's responses both as a result of the tasks and during their peer coaching feedback sessions (Koshy, 2010)

### Typical format of the workshop

1. Initially, the researchers identified pre-existing attitudes to the skills being developed – e.g. children's understanding of feedback; what it is like to give and receive feedback; and what use, if any, they make of feedback already given to them. This was done through group discussion in the classroom. This was important in setting a base for shifts in behaviour that would be identified further as the project developed. Four activities were set as follows:
  - In the first activity, the children were given a stimulus (pictures and models of giraffes) and asked to draw a giraffe by themselves.
  - Next, the children were asked to swap with their partner and give the other

person feedback about their drawing, first finding three things they liked about the giraffe, and then one thing that they might change if asked to draw the giraffe again. Once they had written their feedback, they were asked to swap their drawings back with their partner and allowed time to review the feedback given before moving on to the next activity.

- The second task involved a competitive activity of playing seven games of noughts and crosses or tick tack toe. After a moment's reflection, the pairs gave each other feedback orally. Here too they were told to start with the positives and then select one area for improvement.
  - The third activity was a physical one where the children had to work collaboratively to complete the task of successfully throwing and catching a ball 10 times without either person dropping it. At the end of this activity, the children were asked to reflect and then give each other feedback orally.
2. The final activity involved returning to their giraffe drawings and considering the feedback they had been given before drawing the giraffe for a second time.
  3. The workshop ended with a review of the activities. We asked the children what they had learnt. The children were invited to share with the researchers any questions or comments related to the day's work.

All the activities were completed in pairs with some sets of three children according to class numbers. We relied on the class teachers to assist with any groupings as necessary as they had day-to-day knowledge of the children.

### Ethical considerations

The researchers gained the necessary permissions for the workshops from the schools and teachers involved. As this was considered part of the normal school day the class teachers were present during all sessions. All children had the right to withdraw from the activity if they wished at any time. All drawings and responses were anonymous and no school and/or individual can be identified from the information presented here.

### Alterations as the workshops progressed

On-going cycle of changes to the workshop whilst presenting them to classes occurred quite naturally as we responded to the shifting needs of each class and our developing skills with facilitating the workshops. For example, following a discussion between the researchers, we noted that the first group of primary school children we worked with were very concerned about getting their initial drawings right and so spent more time than we had anticipated on the actual drawing of the giraffe as activity 1. They were using erasers which meant that we had to allow a longer period of time for this activity. This made us consider the precision of the remit we would give in future workshops including a time limit for the drawing and focus on key features of a giraffe as it is a challenging animal to draw. Another key issue occurred with the fact that children were using pencils to draw. For the purposes of the research, it was necessary to photocopy the children's drawings. Those pictures drawn in pencil provided very poor copies. Part of the change in specification for this activity included banning the use of erasers and the use of pen so we could more easily be able to see the drawings.

A second issue arose naturally as we facilitated the feedback after each activity in school 2's workshop. We encouraged the children to reflect on the feedback that they would give and how they would do this before we asked the pairs/small groups to actually give the feedback to each other. One of the teachers sitting in on the session commented on this saying she would make a note of this approach and feed this into similar activities in the class. This practice was then carried into the subsequent workshops.

### Evaluation of workshops

In order to evaluate our workshops we decided upon the following methods of data collection.

- Responses from the children during the workshops.
- Pre- and post-feedback drawings of the giraffes.
- Feedback from the teachers observing the workshops.
- The researchers' reflection on the activities and feedback for each other in relation to the delivery of the workshops.

The details of the analysis appear in Briggs and van Nieuwerburgh (2010)

### Reflections

One positive outcome of the project is that the collaboration between two researchers from different institutions allowed for constructive challenge and an in-depth discussion about our findings. Equally, we had decided from the outset to involve the class teachers as much as possible. This was helpful in a practical way during the workshops. Even more importantly, the researchers were able to test their findings with the class teachers who often provided interesting new perspectives. Finally, the iterative process that was followed allowed the researchers to adapt their workshops to better meet the needs of the children and take into account the different classroom cultures and norms of each school.

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